His obsession began innocently enough, with the puppies and broken-winged birds every little boy begs to bring home. Over the years, Antoine Yates's taste in animals grew ever more exotic, neighbors said, and his collection came to include reptiles, a monkey or two and, according to one neighbor, even a hyena.

He had a deep affection for living creatures in need of a home that he might have picked up from his mother, Martha Yates. She had raised dozens of foster children in her five-bedroom apartment in a public housing high-rise in Harlem, according to one of her foster sons.

In time, Mr. Yates's most exotic pet, a tiger that he named Ming, grew to more than 400 pounds, and that happy home disintegrated. Terrified, Ms. Yates, 67, packed up the last two of her foster children and moved to a suburb of Philadelphia earlier this year, neighbors said.

Mr. Yates, 37, hard pressed to control the tiger, apparently decamped, too, to a nearby apartment. He continued to feed the tiger by throwing raw chickens through a door opened just narrowly enough to keep a paw the size of a lunch plate from swiping through, neighbors said.

On Saturday, the police moved in, alerted by Mr. Yates's curious call in which he claimed to have been bitten by a pit bull. They discovered Ming and managed to remove him, but only after a sharpshooter rappelled down the side of the apartment building and shot it with tranquilizer darts. The mission created a swirl of excitement in the neighborhood and left a series of questions for an assortment of officials. The police are trying to determine where Mr. Yates got a tiger cub and how he managed to raise it from kitten to menace in a public housing project.

Officials at the city's Administration for Children's Services said they were trying to determine whether foster children had lived in the apartment while the tiger and other dangerous animals were there. Officials of the New York City Housing Authority were trying to determine how the tiger escaped the notice of workers at the complex. As was obvious on Saturday, his roar is ferocious.

People who live in the building in the Drew Hamilton Houses at 2430 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard said the tiger had lived among them for at least three years. His presence, while strange, was widely known and did not really alarm anyone, they said.

Jerome Applewhite, 43, who lives on the 18th floor, first encountered Ming about three years ago, when he stopped at the apartment for a visit and saw Mr. Yates sitting with the tiger cub cradled in his arms.

"He was feeding it with a bottle," Mr. Applewhite said. "He cared for his pets."
It did not surprise him much, he said, that an animal seen only in the East — or the north, if that includes the Bronx Zoo — should show up in a city apartment. "It was a house pet," Mr. Applewhite said. "To me that is cool."

City officials did not share his view. "Tigers are dangerous animals," Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg told reporters yesterday at a news conference on Fifth Avenue before marching in the Pulaski Day Parade. "Clearly this tiger should not have been anyplace in New York City outside of a zoo."

Investigators from the New York Police Department were questioning Mr. Yates yesterday, who was placed under guard after he was located at a Philadelphia hospital. On Wednesday, he went to Harlem Hospital Center, where he gave skeptical doctors his account of being bitten by a pit bull. He checked out early Saturday, prompting an inquiry into his whereabouts.

Mr. Yates could be charged with reckless endangerment, the police said, and he will be returned to New York after he is released from the Philadelphia hospital, the police said.

Kathleen Carlson, a spokeswoman for the Administration for Children's Services, said the agency was "looking into our history, if any, at this address."

Howard Marder, a spokesman for the housing authority, which oversees public housing, said officials were trying to determine when the apartment was last inspected and how a tiger was not detected. He said authority records indicated that one complaint was received about the smell of urine coming from the apartment.

Public housing residents are permitted only one pet, and it must weigh no more than 40 pounds, Mr. Marder said. It was unclear exactly who was supposed to be living in the Yateses' apartment, he added. He said records indicated that Ms. Yates moved out in January, but neighbors said she was still living in the apartment as recently as June.

The tiger, along with a five-foot-long alligator-like reptile called a caiman that was also found in the apartment, was taken to a New York animal shelter, and the tiger has been sent to live in a wildlife preserve in Ohio, city officials said.

Residents of the Drew Hamilton Houses who knew Mr. Yates said yesterday that he was well known as an outsized character who, above all else, loved animals, but none of them were sure how he came to have a tiger cub.

"Every time I have ever seen him, he was talking about his exotic animals," said Wanda Tompkins, 26, whose family has lived in the apartment directly below Mr. Yates's for five years. "He was nice, but he was strange a bit."

Ms. Tompkins's mother, Valerie, said she had long known that a strange assortment of beasts lived upstairs. It was not a problem until this summer, when she tried to raise her windows and found the sills soaked with urine and an animal stench invading her apartment.

"I complained to housing, but they never responded," Valerie Tompkins said. "It does sound far fetched."
She had never seen the tiger, but her daughter Janaya had. Janaya, 11, was a friend of one of Ms. Yates's foster children, a girl named Dana, Janaya said.

"She asked me if I wanted to see the tiger," Janaya said. She told Dana, yes, she did want to see it, and she was led to one of the apartment's bedrooms. The tiger was lying inside a cage. Janaya said she was too terrified to pet it. "It was scary," she said.

Raven Eaton, who works at the nearby Associated Supermarket, said Mr. Yates would come into the store every afternoon to buy several bags of raw chicken.

"He said they were for his animals," Ms. Eaton said. He never said what kind of animals he had. "He was as normal as someone like Antoine could be."

Whatever his motives, city officials said, it is both unsafe and cruel to keep a tiger in an apartment. A police officer who answered the telephone in Mr. Yates's room at the University of Pennsylvania Medical Center in Philadelphia said Mr. Yates did not wish to be interviewed.

Last night, a young woman who answered the door of Martha Yates's two-story house in Yeadon, Pa., just west of Philadelphia, identified herself as a daughter and said her mother would have no comment.

Mr. Yates's brother Aaron, 24, said Antoine Yates cared for his animals and never wanted to hurt them.

"His love for animals started when we were babies," he said. "He would nurse animals off the street. He got that from my mother."

"He was straight up," he added. "He raised a healthy tiger. They should find him a job with animals."